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Sound on Sound: Considerations for the Use of Sonic Methods in Ethnographic Fieldwork inside the Recording Studio

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Introduction

The recording studio has been overlooked as a potential site of study within the field of sound studies and across other academic disciplines too. Consequently, there is a limited amount of published research involving ethnographic fieldwork inside the studio (some notable exceptions include Hennion 1990; Fitzgerald 1996; Meintjes 2003, 2004; Porcello 2004; Gibson 2005; Williams 2007, 2009; Bates 2008; Thompson 2016, 2019). A critical reason for this dearth of study inside recording facilities is because the recording studio is designed to be isolated both acoustically and socially (Thompson and Lashua 2014). In her rich ethnographic study of Downtown Studios in Johannesburg, South Africa, Louise Meintjes noted that: 'the studio is remote and exclusive. It is closed to outsiders except for haphazard, enticing ingressions like mine and those of friends of the music-makers who might drop in for a session or a moment' (2012: 270) and so researchers' first challenge is in gaining access to a recording studio session. Once inside, researchers are challenged to consider how the medium of sound can be used to represent the multimodality of recording studio fieldwork. In so doing, researchers need to 'rethink the ocularcentrism through which anthropology has generally constructed knowledge about culture' (Kheshti 2009: 15) and find new ways to explore the cultural field of the recording studio through sound. The following chapter draws upon the author's experiences of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in recording studios in the UK, Canada, and the USA and offers some useful insights into the recording studio as a space for sound studies and suggests a number of pragmatic approaches in capturing the aural ecology of the recording studio.

Sound and the studio architecture

The majority of recording studios have two principal areas of operation: the control room and the live room. The control room typically houses the vast array of recording equipment needed to capture the performances of the musicians, which includes the mixing console, speakers (referred to as monitors), computers, tape machines, and sound processing equipment that the engineer can access during a recording session. The live room is often larger as it has to accommodate performing musicians (which in some cases may be an entire orchestra). The two rooms are acoustically separated from each other to avoid sound transference between them. Communication between the rooms is achieved visually, often through a large acoustically sealed window, and sonically through a talk-back microphone on the mixing console and the headphones of the musicians.From an acoustic perspective, the control room and live room are normally designed differently reflecting their specific purpose. The control room is often significantly less reverberant than the live room as engineers and producers require a space that reduces the amount of sound reflections from the surfaces of the room to prioritize the direct sound from the studio monitors. In this way, engineers and producers can make critical judgements on microphone quality, microphone positioning, the sonic qualities of a musician's instrument or the accuracy of a musician's performance. The live room is typically more reverberant, often designed with more reflective materials such as wood, in order to help musicians deliver their performance, as acoustically dead environments can be very uncomfortable to perform in. Live rooms sometimes have moveable design features to alter the acoustics of the space with reversible or movable acoustic panels, carpets, or curtains to 'liven' or 'deaden' the acoustic depending upon the requirements of the recording session. It is through its characteristic architecture that the recording studio places an overtly sharp focus on the quality of sound:

> The acoustics mark the studio as a space out of the ordinary. But its distinction is not only derived from its focus around a sense other than the eye [...]. The studio also draws enchantment from the very quality of the sense it privileges. (Meintjes 2012: 272)

This privileged medium operates within three distinct and interrelated sound worlds: (1) the control room, (2) the live room, and (3) headphones. For researchers interested in the aural ecology beyond these main sound worlds there are also often a series of 'backstage' areas such as the lounge, the kitchen, the hallway, the parking lot – these are the areas that don't appear to be directly related to studio work but where interpersonal dynamic interchanges occur and where a lot of rich sound material can come from.

Accessing the sounds of the studio

Although highlighted as one of the central issues within empirical research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1997), it is startling that the issue of accessibility isn't foregrounded in previous studies of the recording studio (with the exceptions of Meintjes 2003, 2012; and Bates 2008), particularly as the issue of accessibility is ongoing throughout the entire process but is 'often at its most acute in initial negotiations to enter a setting during the "first days in the field"' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1997: 54). Issues of accessibility within my first recording studio study were evident from some of the initial exchanges of contact between the intended participants and myself. The social world of recording studios, and consequently their sound worlds, can be largely inaccessible for even the musicians who wish to record in them (both financially and socially), so gaining access to a recording studio both socially and physically can be a challenging task for an ethnographer. A fundamental reason for this is that recording studios are 'sealed' facilities in several ways: firstly, they are often constructed to be separated acoustically from their local environment so that sound doesn't disturb nearby buildings or residences and, most importantly, so that sound does not enter the recording studio and hinder the recording process. Secondly, recording studios are not public spaces (like a city square or a town library) and so physical access to them is limited and gained only by invitation from the engineer, producer, or from the studio manager or studio owner. Thirdly and fundamentally, the recording studio during a recording session is a place of work in which studio personnel and musicians require an environment that is private and free from distraction, which allows them to create an intimate setting and thereby maximize effective collaboration and communication.

Gaining access to a recording session can be the most challenging obstacle of all, particularly because a recording session is often limited to only those involved in the recording process. Any additional individuals in the recording studio may become a distraction, affect the flow of the session, or disrupt communication between the studio personnel. In her ethnographic study of female popular musicians Mavis Bayton (1990) identified the importance of privacy in the practice room in order to enable effective collaboration and to resolve any issues. In a similar way, recording studios are intentionally secluded with access limited to only those involved in the recording process. For an ethnographer who is not directly involved in the recording process there is little opportunity to gain access to the sounds of the recording session.

My own initial attempts to gain access to a recording studio session began with an exploration of my personal network of recording engineers and record producers who were either previous colleagues of mine or friends of these colleagues. I assumed that having a background as a practitioner would prove to be useful when seeking permission to conduct ethnography in the recording studio and my first contact was a commercially successful record producer working at a recording studio in Liverpool. He showed some interest when discussing the intended research, however, when I asked him if he would mind me observing an upcoming recording session the

response was tentative and he expressed a preference for me to only observe bands that were not signed to a record label. He was concerned that if signed bands were involved there might not only be an infringement of copyright but additional people from the recording studio might need clearance from the record label or management company concerned. In response I suggested that I could perform menial tasks in the studio, such as setting up microphones or coiling cables, which might help to remove the explicit role of the 'observer' or 'listener' in the room. He was adamant that he would already have enough personnel for the session but agreed to a follow-up phone call to arrange a meeting and discuss the project further. However, after numerous failed attempts to get in touch, I decided to explore other possible contacts.In an attempt to learn from my initial attempt to gain access to a studio session, I emphasized to other potential record producers that observation wouldn't get in the way of the record-making process. These responses were also justifiably hesitant because 'unfortunately, my studio is too small to have an extra person' and 'the bands I work with are signed so the label won't want anyone else involved' (personal communication, 2011). It was evident through my efforts to gain access to a recording studio session through my network of engineers and record producers, that as the ethnographer I had been positioned as an outsider. The role of outsider in the recording studio has an identifiable tradition in popular music where at best you are surplus to requirements and at worst you are considered to be negatively impacting the flow of a session. Engineer Dan Turner explains that:

> The studio is often such a private, intimate place that any outsider inevitably changes the way you operate, often directly influenced by the circumstances of the session [...] it can completely ruin your day [...] any outsider can change the whole atmosphere and often get in the way. (personal interview, 2012)

Record producer Phil Harding adds that:

> Having an outsider in the room when I'm working with an artist in the studio would be too compromising. You want to give your client and your artist the best performance from your side and you're going to feel compromised if there's an outsider in the room. I have had situations where I've had to ask the artist to either get their friends to leave or not come in next time. On the other hand, I can certainly remember for instance Toyah Wilcox, when I was engineering with a producer and a group of her session musicians, her boyfriend would often come in and constantly make comments [...] that's so difficult, who's going to say to Toyah 'don't bring your boyfriend?' (personal interview, 2012)

Both the responses from engineers and producers, and the initial failure to gain access to a recording studio session, highlighted that although engineers and record producers facilitate the needs of the musician and act as intermediaries between the artist and the industry, they are not the gatekeepers to a recording session. As identified by both Dan Turner and Phil Harding, the gatekeepers to a recording studio session are the musicians who are recording in the studio. Sonic ethnographers should therefore begin their search for a recording studio by approaching the musicians on the session first as this will ease negotiations with engineers or record producers at a

later date. If the musicians are the main client and are paying for the studio time then it's even more likely that access will be granted once you've gained permission from the recording musicians. Creating a rapport with musicians before the studio session may also help in creating a more cohesive atmosphere in which the researcher isn't adversely affecting the flow of the session. The challenges of gaining access to a recording studio session described above not only show some of the mechanisms of recording studio practice but also highlight some of the power relations and social hierarchies that can operate covertly within a recording studio context.

Sound and social relations

The social and physical issues that surround gaining access to a recording studio session serve to illustrate the unique social imperatives that govern recording studio practice. Because ethnography demands immersion into the social context of interest, the ethnographer's position within the recording studio session, both physically and socially, in other words 'the ethnographic self ' (Coffey 1999), must also be addressed. The primary intention of any research is often to avoid influencing the natural processes that occur in the setting, which in the instance of sonic ethnography, means attempting to maintain a primarily 'listener' position. This however can prove difficult as it isn't always possible (or desirable) to be a continual 'fly-on-the-wall'. The close proximity of the studio participants means that avoiding conversation or social interaction could adversely affect the atmosphere and the natural social exchanges that occur during a studio session. This is no more acute than when the researcher may be asked, 'What do you think?' after a particular take of a performance. For this reason, discussing the expectations of the research and explaining the researcher's position to the participants is necessary before the fieldwork begins.

In my own research (Thompson 2016), I was able to explain my researcher position during a pre-production meeting between the band and the record producer. Pre-production is typically the stage before the musicians enter the studio and allows the band and record producer to sketch out what they plan to do over the course of making the record. Pre-production 'serves as a vital preparatory stage during which an image of the record's shape and tone is developed, even if only in a rough form' (Zak 2001: 137). During the pre-production meeting, I invited the band to ask questions about the research, which allowed their role and the researcher's role to become less ambiguous and dispelled the band's initial assumption that they would have to behave or perform in a particular way to avoid any contact with me or my sound recording equipment. Without discussing this during pre-production, the participants may have found the presence of a researcher in the recording studio unsettling, which in turn could have undesirably altered the flow of the recording session. This is commonly referred to as 'observer effects' and these interactions with the field and its participants have historically been viewed as a negative attribute of ethnographic research because:

> They indicate a 'contamination' of the supposedly pure social environment being studied (Hunt 1985). Some methodologists advise qualitative researchers to hone an awareness of possible observer effects, document them, and incorporate them as caveats into reports on fieldwork (Patton 2002). Others encourage ethnographers to seek out explicitly evidence of observer effects to better understand – and then mitigate – 'researcher-induced distortions' (e.g., LeCompte and Goetz 1982; Spano 2006) [...]. The possibility that the ethnographer can both have an effect and by doing so tap into valuable and accurate data is seldom explored in contemporary literature on methods.(Monahan and Fisher 2010: 358)

Building relationships through social interaction during a recording session has proved to be an important aspect of my research in the recording studio. Rather than ignoring the participants and minimizing observer or 'listener' effects, developing a rapport with those involved can allow greater access to their thoughts and ideas that would not be possible through listening to a sound recording alone. In addition, discussing other artists' work, technologies, and practices, can also help to frame the participants' musical references, musical influences and importantly their musical performances. A non-participatory perspective on field relations may restrict access to 'rich data in the field' (Monahan and Fisher 2010: 370), may lead to 'failing to understand the orientations of the participants' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 87). The underlying role of the researcher is therefore 'not to determine "the truth" but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives' (Emerson et al. 1995: 3–4).Whilst participation and interaction can prove fruitful in gaining greater insight into the sound world of the recording studio it should also be considerate to the social situation and the established conduct of the recording studio. This is commonly referred to as 'studio etiquette'. Etiquette is described as a 'collective social knowledge – "no one taught us these rules" – the rules are learned through long years of socialization' (Sawyer 2000: 18) and studio etiquette is a general expectation of all recording studio personnel who support the recording process. Signature Sound Studios offers the following on studio etiquette:

> Knowing when it is appropriate to communicate in the studio is perhaps one of the most important concepts to grasp [...]. On the other hand, knowing when to be silent is also very important. For example, when an engineer is in the middle of a recording or mixing session – even if he or she is just listening back and not hands-on doing something – do not interrupt by asking questions, making comments, or any other unnecessary noise. Any of these actions might break the engineer's concentration and he or she will probably not be very pleased with you. Your best bet when you find yourself in a recording session is to be silent, observant, and readily available if your help is needed. (Signature Sound 2011)

The expectations and recommendations described above are not only relevant to studio apprentices; they are suitably applicable for listeners conducting sound research in the recording studio. Observing studio etiquette is necessary to allow all the participants to communicate effectively between each other, for the engineer and record producer to make critical judgements on the musicians' performances and to maintain a degree of naturalness in the field setting. Observing studio etiquette is not

only an essential part of effective social integration during a recording session, it also governs the timing and opportunity for informal interviews and exploratory conversations. Knowing when to ask a question becomes a useful skill that develops as the researcher becomes more familiar with the working practices of the participants throughout the process.

Capturing the sound of the studio

Conducting sonic research in the recording studio presents some unique social and logistical challenges that are fundamentally related to the distinct architecture of the recording studio and the social setting of a recording session. The construction of a typical recording studio creates a division between the control room and the performance space 'with a glass window that isolates the sound of one world from the other' (Williams 2011). This presents a challenge to the researcher who is only using one microphone to record the sound of the recording studio. If listening is taking place in the control room as the musicians are recording then it is only the sound of the control room that is captured and not the actions and interactions in the live room. Therefore to fully appreciate the sound worlds of the recording studio capturing the sound of both the control room and the live room can help to gain a perspective on what the performing musicians experience, and similarly in the control room in order to record the sonic experiences of the engineer and the producer.

In visual anthropology, the point of view offered by a single camera invites questions of 'where shots are to be taken, whether the camera should be fixed or mobile, whether a single focus is to be adopted or whether the focus should vary; and if so when and how' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 148). It also questions the representation of a single view based on the researcher's relationship to the field and their fieldwork: 'the ethnographic self ' (Coffey 1999). Capturing the sonic ecology of the recording studio too presents the same logistic as well as political and social aspects of representation, which Roshanak Kheshti labels 'aural positionality' and 'although sonic representation could be said to be less reductive and more ambiguous than visual representation, sonic representations of culture nonetheless include an imposed layer of meaning mediated by the body and ears of the ethnographer, recordist, editor and producer' (Kheshti 2009: 15). In choosing what to focus a microphone on, researchers knowingly or otherwise are therefore engaged in aural positionality, which can often be influenced by the type of microphone or recording techniques used.

Binaural recording is a method that uses two microphones arranged to capture sound in a similar fashion to the human ear. There are expensive and inexpensive versions of binaural recording, from using a dummy head with two, omnidirectional precision microphones placed inside a moulded set of pinnae that models a human head, or using a stereo pair of microphones that can be positioned either side of the researcher's head. In Kheshti's case, using a microphone attached to the researcher situates her own aural positionality as 'the vantage point from which my body and the

attached microphone hear the sounds that are recorded and re-presented in the context of my ethnography impacts what listeners hear when they listen' (Kheshti 2009: 15). In a recording studio situation binaural microphones placed near to the researcher's ears may provide a lifelike representation of the acoustic space of the studio but may limit where the researcher can capture sound based on the size of the studio or the particular situation during the studio session.

Using a single microphone that can be extended away from a recorder may offer more flexibility to the researcher to capture parts of the studio's acoustic ecology beyond where the researcher can reach. Although limited in its single perspective, it allows a greater exploration of sound in the studio space and, in addressing aural positionality, the position of the researcher's microphone may be determined in consultation with the engineer, producer, or musicians. This may help to both remove some of the researcher's representational-bias and directly involve those whose sonic world you are attempting to capture. Consulting the engineer may also help the researcher gain some insight into their particular process for positioning microphones during a session and some of the things they consider when doing so.

Finally, although it may present a technical challenge to the researcher, another useful way of addressing aural positionality is through the use of multiple microphones at the same time. Using a computer, audio software, a series of microphones positioned around the studio space, and an audio interface (that converts microphone signals into digital signals), the researcher can effectively capture different perspectives of the acoustic environment in a single recording session without the need for the researcher to move between the studio's multiple spaces. One distinct advantage of using multiple microphones to capture the acoustic ecology of the recording studio is that they are naturalized within the space; that is, studio participants expect to see microphones throughout the space and therefore a researcher's microphone wouldn't be considered out-of-place or particularly conspicuous.

Sound on sound in the studio

The permanence of recorded sound is a distinct affordance as the entirety of each recording session can be repeatedly played and replayed, allowing our focus or attention to be changed each time the audio is played. This can also serve to identify sonic events that may not have been evident in situ. Multi-perspective microphones provide an opportunity to capture different aspects of the acoustic ecology of the recording studio and, once reassembled for listening, may offer the researcher an alternative to solely writing about the culture of studio recording. Kheshti labels the practice of focusing on cultural acoustics 'acoustic ethnography' or 'acoustigraphy', which 'like ethnography, is a form of writing culture, with an emphasis on sound over other media, or sound alongside other media with a particular sensitivity to sonic culture' (Kheshti 2009: 15).

Using the medium of sound to capture the sonic interactions of a space that privileges sound over any other sense has some distinct advantages, not least that it is a space designed for recording, controlling, and processing sound and therefore allows the researcher to capture high-resolution sound recordings with reduced extraneous noise or sound reflections that can mask speech intelligibility. Rick Altman reminds us though that 'according to the choice of recording location, microphone type, recording system, postproduction manipulation, storage medium, playback arrangement, and playback locations, each recording proposes an interpretation of the original sound' (Altman 2012: 229). Analysing the recorded sound of the studio therefore requires consideration for the context, the situation, the positionality of the microphone and the researcher and the ethical implications of recording audio in the studio. Firstly, contextualization of the recordings is needed to highlight particular details because:

> With a camera it is possible to catch the salient features of a visual panorama to create an impression that is immediately evident. The microphone does not operate this way. It samples details. It gives the close-up but nothing corresponding to aerial photography. (Schafer 2012: 99)

Because of the lack of visual information from a sound recording it may not be possible to know who is present during the recording and including a map of the studio space, the location of the microphone (or microphones) and a general layout of where participants were can help to provide important contextual information for both the researcher and the listener. The position of studio participants can change over the course of a recording session, which can then in turn alter what is captured, and so updating maps and diagrams as a recording session progresses can help to provide both a visual record and some useful context to the sound recordings.

Analysis of the situation is also key to contextualizing the recorded sound captured in the studio. Sound can tell us a lot about a recording studio situation; there may be times of intense sonic activity or periods of almost total silence and this can be dependent upon the time of day, the purpose or type of recording session, and whether or not the audio was captured towards the beginning of a session or towards the end. Long periods of silence, for example, where no one is listening to playback, discussing another take, or generally interacting may underline a particularly tense atmosphere. Laughing and general joviality may indicate that things are going well – having an understanding of the studio participants and their personalities can help significantly in these assessments and developing a social rapport will go some way to help these analyses.

The type of sonic interactions can also tell us a lot about the positionality of the researcher or the recording device. For example, collecting sound in the control room is likely to relate to sound engineers and record producers; musicians do enter the control room throughout a studio session but a lot of the time the control room is the domain of the sound engineer, the record producer and associates of the process such as record company representatives, band management, partners of the band. Conversely, whilst engineers and producers enter the live room to adjust microphone

positions or discuss alterations to performances, arrangements, or lyrics, etc. with performing musicians, sound in the live room will typically relate to musicians and their sonic experiences of the recording process.

Importantly, there are ethical implications for capturing the entirety of a recording session both prior to gaining ethical approval form participants and after the data has been gathered. Audio recordings capture conversations and the overall sonic environment of the recording studio but, because of the naturalization of the microphone in the studio, participants often forget that recording is taking place and can sometimes reveal intimate details, offer private information, or make remarks about other participants that aren't intended to be heard. It is therefore imperative that any of the recorded audio is scrutinized before it is replayed to any of the other participants to avoid any unnecessary harm or distress. This is most important where instrumental or vocal performances are being discussed and care must be taken to introduce the background of the discussion in order to contextualize the comments of the participants.

Conclusion

The recording studio is an exciting and varied acoustic space in which to conduct sonic ethnography and capture the sound of the rooms, the equipment, and the interactions of its inhabitants. There are three main sound worlds in the recording studio as well as a series of 'backstage' areas where a lot of rich sound material can come from. The recording studio however is fortress-like both acoustically and socially and therefore gaining access to a recording session is a challenge for researchers. Although engineers and record producers facilitate the needs of the musician and act as intermediaries between the artist and the industry, it is musicians that are the gatekeepers to a recording session and permission should be sought from them first. If the recording musicians are paying for the studio time then it is even more likely that access will be granted from other participants, such as engineers or producers, once permission has been granted from the recording musicians.Once inside the recording studio, conducting sonic research presents some unique social and logistical challenges because of the recording studio's architecture and the social setting of a recording session. A single audio recorder, a single microphone, or a binaural recorder attached to the researcher can adequately capture the sound of a single sound world of the studio but using multiple microphones allows the researcher to capture the acoustic ecology of the recording studio from various perspectives and, because microphones are naturalized within the studio space, researcher's microphones wouldn't be considered particularly conspicuous.

Finally, analysing the recorded sound of the studio requires consideration for the context, the situation, the positionality of the microphone/researcher, and the ethical implications of recording audio in the studio. In reassembling the captured sounds for playback, sound ethnographers should consider each of these aspects in turn to creatively and responsibly present the 'acoustigraphy' of a recording studio session

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